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ABSTRACT

Everyman's University (EU) in Israel acts as a social safety valve by providing an avenue for education to students who are unable to attend conventional universities; however, the heterogeneity of EU's student population creates many problems for course developers and coordinators. Differing from other Israeli universities, EU operates by distance teaching and has an open admission policy. Students are made up of those who, although qualified academically, are prevented from attending the conventional universities either because of structural difficulties or cultural barriers, as well as those who do not meet the formal education requirements for university entrance. The programs in math and science have very strict requirements, however, and 150 academic courses offered cover a wide spectrum of disciplines. EU course developers invest much ingenuity and many resources in coping with the learning difficulties of weaker students in these areas without lowering the academic standards of the courses. All lecture material must be submitted for review by colleagues and experts for linguistic and pedagogical soundness of material. Many of the courses are multi-media with written study units making up the core. In addition, every student is assigned to a tutorial group, and students may also confer with course coordinators by phone or letter. More extensive tutoring is also available for students who were attracted to the university mainly because of its open admission policy. Special effort goes into the development of introductory courses to familiarize students with concepts or theories particular to a course and to provide them with "model answers" in order to explain phenomena being discussed; assignments require the application of newly acquired knowledge to events not covered in course material. Guidance counselors are also available to aid new students in overcoming some of the difficulties of coping with courses. (DRJ)

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DISTANCE EDUCATION TOWARD ACADEMIC DEGREES:

EVERYMAN'S UNIVERSITY IN ISRAEL

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Yael Enoch

Everyman's University

ABSTRACT:

Israel is a small country (pop. 4 mill.) with a very heterogeneous population, the majority of which immigrated since the state gained independence in 1948. Though the goal of "ingathering the exiles" has thus been accomplished in the physical sense it has still not been achieved on the social, economical and educational level. Large differences in achievement still exist between various population groups. Israel's conventional universities are all elitistic institutions that cater to a highly selective student population, whereas Everyman's University (EU) offers tertiary education to several categories of students who are unable to study at the conventional universities. It is argued that EU fulfills an important function as a safety-valve mechanism for Israeli society by providing an alternative avenue of social mobility to disadvantaged groups. The heterogeneity of EU's student population creates many problems for both course developers and course coordinators. Some of these problems and ways of overcoming them are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Tertiary education fulfills a number of different functions for the society in which it operates: creating the knowledge which will be the expertise of tomorrow's professional and technical workers; selecting the people who will perform high level jobs in science, business and government; creating an intellectual elite to further art, music and literature. (Clark, 1962).

I wish to propose, however, that in certain social contexts a university may act as a social safety-valve, a mechanism to ease social tension (Parsons, 1977) and provide a legitimate outlet for what could otherwise become dangerously pent-up feelings of social deprivation. An example of such an institution is, as I will attempt to show, Everyman's University (EU), in Israel, which provides tertiary level education (Bachelor's degrees) by distance teaching.

Israel - A Country of Immigrants

Israel is a small country - 21,500 square kilometers (8,000 square miles) and has approximately four million inhabitants. It has grown and developed rapidly during its 37 years of independent existence. From merely 870,000 inhabitants in 1948, it has reached its present 4 million by absorbing immigrants from about 100 different countries, who brought with them a vast spectrum of languages, traditions and educational backgrounds. Over 80% of the population is Jewish, 17% Arabs (Moslems, Christians and Druze). The Israeli Jewish population consists of two major ethnic groups. The "Sephardi" Jews who were born in (or whose parents immigrated from) North Africa, the Middle Eastern countries, Iran, Iraq, etc. comprise about 60% of the Jewish population, whereas the "Ashkenazi" Jews who were born in Europe or America or whose parents immigrated from these countries making up the remaining 40%. The Sephardi Jews as well as the Israeli Arabs are disproportionately represented in the lower socio-economic strata of the Israeli society, whereas the Ashkenazi Jews are over-represented in the medium and higher strata - as may be seen from Table 1 which provides a partial picture of the educational and occupational achievements of the different groups.

Table 1: Educational and Occupational Levels of Population Groups in Israel (1)

	Immigrants		Natives		Arabs
	Sephardi	Ashkenazi	Sephardi	Ashkenazi	
Median years of Education	7.6	10.3	10.4	11.5	7.6
% of 20-29 yr. old studying at universities	2.8%	9.1%	2.6%	12.7%	0.5% (2)
% with academic degrees	3.6%	14.5%	3.1%	19.7%	2.1%
% of employees in professional technical and managerial jobs	11.7%	29.1%	15.6%	39.6%	9.5%
% of employees in unskilled building & industry jobs	5.3%	2.9%	3.3%	0.3%	13.7%

As may be seen from the data the initial differences in socio-economic achievements which exist among the first generation immigrants remain intact to a large extent also among the native born. In other words, Israel has not been able to "ingather its exiles" in the sense of creating a society where ethnic background is no longer a near certain predictor of social status. It might seem, however, that at least the educational gap between the two major Jewish groups has been closed (see Table 1) This is to some extent true. But the differences in achievement of tertiary education still remain pronounced. In 1982 14.5% of the Ashkenazi immigrants and 19.7% of native Israelis of Ashkenazi descent possessed an academic degree, as compared to 3.6% of the Sephardi immigrants, 3.1% of native Israelis of Sephardi descent and 2.1% of Israeli Arabs.

Higher Education in Israel

Seven fully-fledged universities function in Israel. Despite differences in location, in size of student population and to some extent in subjects taught, they all maintain a very high academic level. Only candidates who have passed the quite difficult high school finals can sit for university entrance examinations and of these only the most successful candidates are admitted. In some departments like medicine, law, psychology or English only about 1 in 10 applicants (in some cases even fewer) are admitted. In short the conventional universities may be characterized as elite-institutions, and there are very few academic alternatives available for potential students who do not meet their very strict requirements. The universities are situated in Israel's major cities (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa and Beer Sheva) and most of them have very limited dormitory facilities. Tuition fees which amount to approximately \$700 per year may be low by American standards, but they are equivalent to 1½-2 months' net salary of an average Israeli employee.

Everyman's University - A Brief Profile

Since it began its operation in 1976 approximately 60,000 students have taken academic courses at EU. In a typical semester our enrollment is approximately 11,000 students - as compared to 12,000 undergraduate students at Tel Aviv University which is the largest of Israel's seven conventional universities or to a total of around 43,000 undergraduates at all of these institutions together.

EU differs from the other Israeli universities in two ways:

- a) It operates by distance teaching.
- b) It has an open admission policy: anybody can register with no previous formal education required and no entrance examinations administered.

Thus EU provides a "second chance" or an alternative route to higher education.

Some of the students are attracted to EU mainly because it is a "Distance Education" university. These students who are often fully qualified academically are prevented from attending the conventional universities either because of structural difficulties or because of cultural barriers. This group includes people living in small agricultural settlements or in development towns, far (because of lack of suitable transportation) from an urban center; army personnel who have many free hours between shifts of duty, but are confined to their army base for many weeks at a time; people who wish to study and at the same time have to continue in their full time jobs or take care of young children.

The method of distance education also attracts a small number of students from some sub-groups in the Israeli society whose social norms prohibit participation in conventional university courses: young Arab women who are not allowed to leave the custody of their fathers or husbands can take courses at EU and attend tutorials in or near their villages. And ultra-orthodox Jews, both men and women, can embark on a clandestine course of academic studies without arousing severe social sanctions from their families or friends.

In addition to these groups of students, EU caters to students who are attracted to EU mainly because it is an "Open Admission" university. They are barred from applying to Israel's highly selective universities, because they do not meet the formal educational requirements for university entrance. To many of these students, EU provides not a second chance, but their only chance to acquire a university degree.

Though many of these students seek out EU as individuals quite a large proportion of them come to us via the "community leaders" project: In an attempt to create local leadership for socially disadvantaged areas, the Israeli authorities have allocated funds to provide advanced training (hopefully leading to academic degrees) for some of the more talented and active inhabitants of these areas. The purpose of such training is: to enhance the social status and the self-image of the local leader as an individual; to provide the younger inhabitants of these problem areas with a role model with whom they can identify - "one of their own" who has made it; to create a more effective local leadership that will be able to utilize some of the skills acquired through their academic training also in their public and political activities.

Thus the students at EU are an extremely heterogeneous group both from the point of view of their motivation for choosing EU but also, and this is more significant, as far as their academic background and study skills are concerned

A few statistical data will help us draw the overall sociological profile of EU's student population - and pinpoint the major differences between the EU students and their counterparts at conventional Israeli universities. (Table 2)

COPING WITH HETEROGENEITY

The over 150 academic courses which EU offers cover a wide spectrum of disciplines: mathematics, physics, biological and life sciences, humanities and social sciences. Maths and the sciences attract small numbers of self-selected students. In addition, the strictly hierarchical nature of the study programme in these fields makes students drop out quickly if they are unable to cope with the very strict requirements in these fields. The humanities and social sciences on the other hand attract large numbers of students, representing the entire spectrum of academic preparation and study skills. Thus the EU course developing teams have to invest much ingenuity and many resources in coping with the learning difficulties of the weaker students without lowering the academic standards of the courses. (5)

Though many of our courses are multi-media, the main component in all of them is the written course material, the attractively designed study units. Some courses also use text books, laboratory kits, radio and television broadcasts. In addition every student is assigned to a tutorial group which meets 5-6 times per semester in one of our 20 study-centers which are located throughout the country. Participation in the group tutorials is not compulsory and some of the students do not attend at all. Students may also confer

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Students at Israeli Universities

		EU 1984(3)	Undergraduates in other Israeli Universities (1)
Age	Up to 24	31%	67%
	25-34	32%	27%
	35+	37%	6%
Ethnicity	Sephardi	29%	21%
	Ashkenazi	56%	63%
	3rd generation Israeli	15%	12%
Sex	Male	49%	54%
	Female	51%	46%
High-School Diploma	Yes	61%	97%
	No	39%	3%
Occupation	Not working	25%	38.3% (4)
	Part-time	15%	{ 61.7% (4)
	Full-time	60%	

with the course-coordinator by phone or letter - and many students who cannot attend tutorials are assisted in this way. For the students who chose EU mainly because it offers Distance Education, this seems an adequate combination.

The students who are attracted to EU mainly because of its open admission policy usually need more extensive tutoring. The special programme for community leaders uses a mode of operation which may be termed "adapted distance education." Its main elements are as follows: On completing a 6 months' pre-academic preparatory course designed to develop study skills, written and oral expression etc., they embark on their first degree-level course. The group as a whole chooses one of the EU courses, usually in the humanities or the social sciences. The group meets with its tutor 12-18 times per semester (as compared to the regular 5-6 times), in a study-center which is situated in or near their community. The students usually get a weekly day of paid leave from their job in order to attend to their studies. In these special groups (like in the regular tutorial groups) participation is not compulsory, as the study material is designed in such a way that (at least theoretically) an adult mature person should be able to work through it by himself. However, most of the students who have participated in this special programme feel the intensive tutoring to be most helpful. Partly as a result of their response EU is now planning to offer some intensively tutored introductory courses also to its regular students.

Course Material

As I pointed out earlier the written study units are the core of the course material. A great deal of effort is made to ensure the high academic standards of this material and at the same time make it understandable to all our students. The university lecturer in a conventional institution is entitled, in the name of academic freedom, to choose any study-material and any mode of presentation he sees fit - without outside control or inspection. In contrast, his counterpart at EU must submit his material for scrupulous reviewing by colleagues and outside experts in his professional field, as well as by editors who vouch for

the linguistic (style, syntax, etc.) and to some extent pedagogical soundness of the material. Special effort goes into the development of introductory courses in the various disciplines. Let me illustrate with a few brief examples from an introductory sociology course which I recently developed.

Learning basic sociology means first of all learning a new vocabulary of concepts which are used in the discipline. The course material defines these concepts, then explains them by numerous examples, some of which are deliberately chosen from the students' everyday life, and finally illustrates them by pictures, caricatures, newspaper clippings. The second purpose of this course is to familiarize the student with current sociological theories in a number of sub-fields: the sociology of the family, deviance, stratification etc. Here the main difficulty is to convey to the students that we do not have one sociological theory accepted by everybody in the field. It is most confusing to all beginners in sociology (and EU students are no exception) that there are several "competing" theories that attempt to explain mate selection or educational aspirations, and that sociologists to day can not offer the answer to any question concerning the function of society or parts of it.

In order to familiarize the student with this state of affairs the course material attempts wherever possible, to offer more than one explanation of the phenomenon being discussed. The examples chosen for consideration are very often taken from the Israeli scene, despite the fact that an introductory sociology course could (some would say ought to) have a cosmopolitan flavour. Here the choice of examples is guided by a desire to meet the student on his own turf - in order to decrease his initial anxiety and demonstrate to him that sociological concepts and theories can add to his understanding of familiar situations in his own society.

Finally the students are given assignments in which they have to apply their newly acquired knowledge to analyze and explain social situations or events which are not discussed in the course material. They usually find this task very difficult, despite the fact that "model answers" are provided in the course material.

Counselling

The group tutor and/or course coordinator are available to discuss with the students (in person, by telephone or letter) any difficulties or problems they may encounter during their course work in general or while answering assignments in particular. Unfortunately, only a few of our students take advantage of this offer and most of them contact their tutor or coordinator only for "practical" problems, such as postponing the deadline for handing in an assignment, transferring temporarily to a different tutorial group etc.

This state of affairs combined with our rather high drop-out rates, especially from introductory courses (30-40%) and especially by students with little formal educational background, has necessitated a fairly new function at EU - the guidance counselor. Unlike the academic counsellors who assist students in selecting courses or tailoring a study programme, the guidance counsellors help new students individually or in small groups to overcome some of the difficulties of coping with the course: planning a weekly schedule to leave enough time for systematic studies or understanding the purpose of the different types of course material. Many new students, who are unfamiliar with learning benefit from instruction and exercises on how to read and summarize material, how to understand the questions and assignments, how to write answers in essay form etc. The guidance counsellors who are trained in psychology and/or education do not

tutor the students in the academic contents of their courses (which range from mathematics to ancient history) but rather help to build up their study skills and self-confidence.

Though no statistical material is yet available on the overall success rate of the guidance counsellors in preventing drop-out, many students have reported that they would not have continued their studies without this assistance.

DISCUSSION

The picture (however brief) presented in this paper of the structure of the Israeli society has focused the attention on one of its major problems: the gap in socio-economic achievement between various ethnic segments of the population. This gap has continuously been on the public agenda in Israel during the last 15 years, ever since a group of young Sephardi Jews from one of Jerusalem's slum areas created a protest movement and presented themselves to the public as "The Black Panthers of Israel". The Israeli establishment was shocked into action and one of the avenues proposed to quieten the dissatisfaction and sense of deprivation expressed by these young people was to offer some of the leaders of the movement access to higher education (Bernstein, 1979). In other words, tertiary education was seen as a possible mechanism to quieten actual or potential social unrest (Parsons, 1977, ch. 8). In view of the elitistic nature of the conventional universities in Israel, they can not readily fulfill this function. Thus there was clearly a niche available, a challenge that had to be taken up, and so in 1974 EU was created. As I have shown EU caters for a number of different student populations who are otherwise barred from even attempting an academic education. It is still too early to assess its impact quantitatively (only 224 students have graduated so far), but the very fact that it exists and that it offers a potential outlet for various disadvantaged groups within Israeli society makes it an effective social safety-valve mechanism, despite the fact that not "every man" actually studies at EU, and despite the fact that not everyone who attempts one or two courses will eventually graduate with a B.A. degree.

NOTES

- (1) Statistical Abstract of Israel (1982), Jerusalem Central Bureau of Statistics
- (2) Estimate based on Smooha, S. (1978). Israel: Pluralism and Conflict, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 139.
- (3) Data supplied by EU's Evaluation Staff.
- (4) Students in Universities: Studies Employment and Sources of Income, Central Bureau of Statistics, Special Series no. 712, Jerusalem, 1983, Table 23, p. p. 63.
- (5) To qualify for a Bachelor's Degree, a student has to accumulate 18 credits by taking 18-24 courses.

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